Visibility: A Double-Edged Sword

By Satveer Kler

"…whiteness of authorship is… a form of authority; to speak… from nowhere, for everyone, is empowering, though one wields power here only by becoming lost to oneself" (Yancy). This idea pervades media discourse as there is an assumed objective narrative starting point for media discourse regardless of social location. Whiteness is not a part of the spectrum of social location because its malleability allows it to infiltrate all discourse while remaining unmarked by social location. The media's discourse revolving Black women punishes those who deviate from this norm of the white discourse by creating a form of respectability politics which locks Black women in a double bind of hypervisibility or invisibility. This respectability politics manifests itself in the form of establishing standards that tell Black women that they must enact a performance of civility and femininity as defined by white audiences. However, gender is experienced differently depending upon how one exists in language or reality. Visibility becomes a double-edged sword as on one hand to become visible risks cooption or consumption by white audiences, and on the other hand not becoming visible risks having narratives rendered perpetually incomprehensible and ignored.

The usage of this discourse shrouded in respectability politics causes Black women to enter a sphere of hypervisibility as the media codes them as hypersexual and promiscuous. When Nicki Minaj released her latest single, "Anaconda," the media had a variety of negative reactions policing Minaj's sexual expression. Tshepo Mokoena of *The Guardian* went as far to say, "…it [undermines] her image as a powerful, independently minded artist to splay her almost-bare butt cheeks in a promotional image…" (Mokoena). Mokoena's commentary may come from a place of genuine concern for Minaj's image, but it relies upon a false sense of mutual exclusivity of being sexual and empowering. Contrary to the views of Mokoena, those two things are not mutually exclusive as Minaj shows that reclaiming sexual expression is liberating. For example, when Minaj states in the song, "Pussy put his ass to sleep, now he calling me NyQuil…" (32), her bars combat the dominant narrative of men ejaculating and going to sleep. She does this by drawing a parallel between her "pussy" and "NyQuil" which shows that her sex is as addicting as a drug that has the power to knock someone out. The visual language Minaj employs at the end of the song when she twerks on Drake leaving him perplexed highlights that the purpose of her performance is to leave the male gaze in a daze while she has already subversively stolen back her sexual expression from the traditionally male dominated space of rap. However, it is easy to blur the line between a discourse of subversive liberation and a discourse that risks cooption by performing for certain audiences. One such performance that runs that risk is the performance of Beyoncé. When referring to Beyoncé's *TIME* cover, in which she posed in her underwear, feminist scholar bell hooks questioned Beyoncé's ownership of her visual discourse. hooks explains, "'Let's take the image of this super rich, very powerful Black female and let's use it in the service of imperialist, white supremacist capitalist patriarchy because she probably had very little control over that cover — that image'" (Fox). As hooks identifies, Beyoncé's performance has been largely coopted by corporate audiences. This is best exemplified by the contrast of Beyoncé's verses and Minaj's in the "***Flawless remix". For example, Beyonce's repetition of "This diamond, flawless / This rock, flawless" (28-29) in the chorus shows that she equates her power and influence with her class. This is a dangerous message to be sending out because it implies that if a woman of different class status owned her sexuality she would most likely come off as what Beyoncé puts as one of, "These thots [that] can't clock me nowadays" (8). Thus, Beyoncé distances herself from 'these thots' by labeling her sexual expression as superior than theirs'. This in contrast to Minaj who is in charge of her sexualized discourse without having to rely on her class privilege as she shows when saying "…let me show you how this cookie taste" (74) which implies that it is her vagina that is as delicious as a sweet, not the man's penis. Beyoncé's feminism, unbeknownst to her, has become that brand that can be marketable to people

who want to eroticize her image as a rich, Black Jezebel because a Black woman's power in front of white, corporate audiences can only be conceptualized and consumed if it conforms to stereotypes. While Minaj manages the difficult act of wielding the double-edged sword of visibility without stabbing herself, Beyoncé has already punctured herself with both ends of hypervisibility and cooption without even knowing.

Hypervisibility extends beyond the realm of the sexual expression of Black women as it also comes in between their ability to act assertive. The media uses its discourse to teach Black women that they cannot be assertive like their white counterparts or they risk conforming to the narrative of the angry, irrational Black woman. The media shows us that one can be powerful and influential as Shonda Rhimes and still be labelled an angry Black woman. Alessandra Stanley, a white woman writing for the *New York Times*, wrote an article critiquing Rhimes' latest hit TV show, *How to Get Away With Murder*. Stanley suggested that the lead character on the show played by Viola Davis is unlikable because she "…terrifies law students and cheats on her husband" (Stanley). Stanley went as far to say that "When Shonda Rhimes writes her autobiography, it should be called 'How to Get Away With Being an Angry Black Woman'" (Stanley). Stanley's invocation of this stereotype is problematic because it overdetermines both what Viola Davis' character can be conceived as and what Shonda Rhimes can be conceived as. This labelling not only posits the emotions of Black women as unacceptable within public discourse, but also labels the emotions as volatile and dangerous. Because to be assertive within discourse means to be masculine, the media and people like Stanley erase the expression of Black women with their constant tone-policing because it poses a danger to the assumed starting point of the white male behind public discourse. Black women's legitimate criticism of the erasure of their identities within public discourse is replaced by this erasure of their expression altogether because after all, they are just being "angry". In her piece, "Hair and Skin V. Soul Within," Shaunita Hampton describes this erasure from personal experience as she writes that the Black woman "…is not allowed to be completely herself, adding or eliminating pieces of her identity in order to be partially accepted by her own culture" (Hampton). In this case, Black women must do away with their opinions, with their emotions, and with any sort of presence within the sphere of public discourse because that realm belongs to the white subjects. As Hampton identifies, a public-private dichotomy is quickly established in response to the opinionated Black women because they "…are essentially trained to be attractive glorified servants first, intellectuals second" (Hampton). Thus in this scenario, hypervisibility quickly transcends into invisibility as this regulation of Black women's public intellectual discourse shuns them back into the domesticized private sphere.

This maintenance of Black women's invisibility does not necessarily have to be a part of a shift from hypervisibility to invisibility because in certain instances the Black woman is always already rendered invisible. Black women are perpetually invisible in the realm of politics and within the legal sphere because both of the discourses employed in those spheres begin with a starting point that ignores the unique social location of the Black woman. For example, in the Trayvon Martin trial Rachel Jeantel's counter hegemonic narrative was so unintelligible to her white audience that her vernacular was coded as "ghetto" (Peters). This particular framing of her discourse is problematic because ghetto is, "Employed to mean "uncouth," "unruly," or "parvenu,"…to stigmatize blacks" (Clemens) such as Rachel Jeantel. Conditioning acceptable discourses within the legal sphere is problematic because it assumes that so-called "ghetto" individuals do not have the right to having their voices heard and do not deserve the justice that everyone is supposedly entitled to. She was coded as "ghetto" because her contextual usage of certain words normally considered slurs was coded as her ignorance. "We witnessed this complex process in action before our very eyes as attorney West kept trying to replace Jeantel's use of a term with his own understanding of it" (Singh). Her references to Zimmerman as being a "creepy ass cracker" were met with staunch criticism by West and members of the media. While Jeantel used the phrase in a specific context to identify the subject location of Zimmerman, it was instead thought of as illiteracy and her credibility as a witness was immediately compromised not because of her, but because of what others

perceived her to be. Conditioning discourse in popular culture is one thing but conditioning discourse in the legal sphere when lives are involved becomes a dangerous game that white discourse gets to play in which the lives of Black people are mere pawns.

To combat this double bind of hypervisibility and invisibility, there are ways that one can become visible without risking cooption. There are ways in which Black women can infiltrate spaces of discourse that has traditionally excluded them in order to gain recognition without running the risk of conforming to stereotypes. Feminist scholar Saidiya Hartman describes a process of "stealing back" from white spaces which involves "…taking or appropriating without right…" (Hartman). According to Hartman, the revolutionary potential of this action is clear in the context of discourse and intelligibility because "The play on 'stealing,'… articulates the dilemma of the subject without rights and the degree to which any exercise of agency or appropriation of the self is only intelligible as crime or already encoded as crime… Stealing away ironically [encapsulates] the impossibility of self-possession as it [exposes] the link between liberty and slave property by playing with and against the terms of dispossession" (Hartman). Stealing away in this instance allows Black women to claim back the subjectivity and humanity that has been denied to them. An act such as this remains unintelligible to whites in the same way that Nicki Minaj's stealing back of sexual expression remains unintelligible to the male gaze of objectification. Black women taking the agency previously denied to them shows an action opaque enough to resist the contours of hypervisibility and invisibility. It can be possible to wield the double-edged sword of hypervisibility and invisibility without stabbing oneself with either side. But stealing the dagger away the dagger of intelligibility from white spaces is a great act of subversion for someone previously denied their agency.

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